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AUTHOR Kerka, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

From its beginnings in 1906, cooperative education has evolved into a program offered at the secondary and postsecondary levels in two predominant models: (1) students complete multiple cycles of equal periods of academic coursework and paid employment; and (2) students' school day is split between school (usually in the morning) and work (usually in the afternoon). Despite informal and anecdotal evidence that cooperative education benefits students in numerous ways, documentation of cooperative education's benefits through empirical research has been difficult for several reasons. Although some institutions are fully dedicated to the cooperative education ideal, many others view cooperative education as an add-on and, therefore, as a target for cost cutting. Several researchers have pointed out that social, economic, and historic forces are making cooperative education more relevant than ever. It has been suggested that cooperative education be redesigned as a curriculum model linking work and academics by fostering self-directed learning, reflective practice, and transformative learning and integrating school and work experiences that are grounded in adult learning theories. Because cooperative education is inherently committed to improving the economy, people's working lives, and lifelong learning abilities, it can position itself to serve students' experiential learning needs into the 21st century. (Contains 15 references.) (MN)

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Sandra Kerka

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by Sandra Kerka

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New Directions for Cooperative Education

Cooperative education has existed in the United States for most of the 20th century as a structured method of combining academic education with practical work experience. For a number of reasons, its promise has not been fully realized (Barton 1996). However, it is taking on new importance in an environment characterized by school-to-work, service learning, and experiential learning initiatives. This Digest explores the factors helping and hindering co-op at this juncture in its history, examines how it is being reconceived to meet contemporary needs, and identifies implications for the broader school-to-work (STW) enterprise.

The Story So Far

From its beginnings in Cincinnati in 1906, cooperative education has evolved into a program offered at the secondary and postsecondary levels in two predominant models (Grubb and Villeneuve 1995). In one model, students alternate a semester of academic coursework with an equal amount of time in paid employment, repeating this cycle several times until graduation. The parallel method splits the day between school (usually in the morning) and work (afternoon). Thus, like STW, the co-op model includes school-based and work-based learning and, in the best programs, "connecting activities" such as seminars and teacher-coordinator worksite visits. These activities help students explicitly connect work and learning.

Co-op's proponents identify benefits for students (including motivation, career clarity, enhanced employability, vocational maturity) and employers (labor force flexibility, recruitment/retention of trained workers, input into curricula) as well as educational institutions and society (ibid.). Beyond informal and anecdotal evidence, however, a familiar refrain in the literature is the lack of well-done research that empirically demonstrates these benefits (Barton 1996; Wilson, Stull, and Vinsonhaler 1996). Barton (1996) identifies some of the research problems for secondary co-op as follows: federal data collection on high school co-op enrollments and completions ceased in the 1980s; some studies use data in which co-op was not isolated from other work experience programs. Ricks et al. (1993) describe other problems: due to lack of a clear or consistent definition of cooperative education, researchers cannot accurately identify variables and findings cannot be compared; theory is not well developed; theory, research, and practice are not integrated; and co-op research does not adhere to established standards.

Another set of problems involves perceptions of the field and its marginalization. Because of its "vocational" association, co-op is not regarded as academically legitimate; rather, it is viewed as taking time away from the classroom (Crow 1997). Experiential activities are not necessarily rewarded in postsecondary promotion and tenure systems, and co-op faculty may be isolated from other faculty (Crow 1997; Schaafsma 1996). Despite the current emphasis on contextual learning, work is not recognized as a vehicle for learning (Ricks et al. 1993). Schaafsma (1996) and Van Gyn (1996) agree that the field places too much emphasis on placements rather than learning. Wilson, Stull, and Vinsonhaler (1996) also decry the focus on administration, logistics, placements, and procedures.

Some institutions are fully dedicated to the co-op ideal (such as Antioch University and LaGuardia Community College). In others, the co-op program may be viewed as an add-on and therefore is vulnerable to cost cutting (Wilson et al. 1996). Even where co-op programs are strong they can be threatened, as at Cincinnati Technical College when it became a comprehensive community college (Grubb and Villeneuve 1995) or LaGuardia during a budget crisis (Grubb and Badway 1998). For students, costs and time to degree completion may be deterrents to co-op participation (Grubb and Villeneuve 1995).

Redesigning Co-op for Current Realities

Although this is a gloomy picture, there are reasons for optimism about the future of co-op. "Social, economic, and historic forces are making cooperative education more relevant than ever" (ibid., p. 17), including emphasis on university-industry-government cooperation, a fluid and demanding workplace, new technology, the need for continuous on-the-job learning, globalization, and demands for accountability (John, Doherty, and Nichols 1995). Federal investments in school-to-work and community service have resulted in a number of initiatives designed to provide "learning opportunities beyond the classroom walls" (Furco 1996, p. 9). Because this has always been a principle of co-op, the field is in a position to capitalize on its strengths and the ways it complements other experiential methods in the effort to provide meaningful learning opportunities for students. To do this, however, cooperative education must be redesigned.

For Wilson, Stull, and Vinsonhaler (1996), a new vision involves conceiving, defining, and presenting co-op "as a curriculum model that links work and academics--a model that is based on sound learning theory" (p. 158). Ricks (1996) suggests affirming the work-based learning principles upon which co-op is based. These principles assert that cooperative education fosters self-directed learning, reflective practice, and transformative learning, and integrates school and work learning experiences that are grounded in adult learning theories.

Schaafsma (1996) also focuses on learning, seeing a need for a paradigm shift from content learning to greater understanding of learning processes, including reflection and critical thinking. Co-op is an experiential method, but learning from experience is not automatic. Therefore, Van Gyn (1996) recommends strengthening the reflective component that is already a part of some co-op models. "If co-op is only a vehicle for experience to gain information about the workplace and to link technical knowledge with workplace application, then its effectiveness is not fully developed" (p. 125).

Integrating Experiential Methods

School-to-work and service learning have also been promoted as ways to link theory and practice through meaningful experiential learning experiences. Furco (1996) outlines the similarities between school-to-work and service learning. Although school-to-work, service learning, and co-op have different goals, each of his points also applies to cooperative education:

- Based on the philosophy that learners learn best through active engagement in meaningful activities
- View of students as active learners and producers of knowledge
- Use of such instructional strategies as contextual learning and application of knowledge to real situations
- Requirement for schools to establish formal partnerships with outside entities
- Concern for integrating school experiences and external experiences

The Community Service Scholarship Program at California State University-Fresno combines cooperative education with service learning. Students receive co-op/internship credit and scholarships for completing a placement at a community service site (Deroust and Sherwood 1997). As in traditional co-op work placements, students get real-world training, opportunities to explore career options, and enhanced employability skills such as communication, problem solving, and leadership as well as awareness of community and social problems. Combining co-op and service learning thus prepares students for roles as workers and citizens.

Research on highly successful co-op programs in Cincinnati (Grubb and Villeneuve 1995) and at LaGuardia Community College (Grubb and Badway 1998) shows that they share the basic philosophy and fundamental characteristics of the educational strategy of school-to-work. The reconceptualization of co-op should recognize and build upon this connection. At the same time, lessons from successful co-op programs can benefit the broader STW movement.

There is a need for broader definition of acceptable models for integrating work and learning. Barton (1996) and Wilson et al. (1996) identify a variety of work-based learning activities taking different names: co-op, internships, externships, apprenticeship, career academies, etc. Work-based learning programs should look for connections and develop collaborative relationships. The alternating and parallel co-op models may not meet the needs of returning adult students and dislocated workers needing retraining (Varty 1994). Alternatives such as extended-day programs emphasizing mentoring should be considered.

Connecting activities to integrate school- and work-based learning are an essential part of STW. At LaGuardia, the required co-op seminar helps students make connections by giving them a structure within which to reinforce employability skills, examine larger issues about work and society, and undertake the crucial activities of critical reflection (Grubb and Badway 1998).

Grubb and Badway (1998) and Grubb and Villeneuve (1995) found that the value of cooperative education is embedded in the culture of the institution (LaGuardia) and the region (Cincinnati). In this supportive culture, employer support does not have to be repeatedly obtained and there are clearly understood long-term expectations on all sides (schools, employers, students). This "informal culture of expectations around work-based learning may be more powerful in the long run than a complex set of regulations and bureaucratic requirements" (Grubb and Villeneuve 1995, p. 27).

However, even LaGuardia has found it difficult to sustain co-op culture over time (Grubb and Badway 1998). "The only way in which STW programs can find a permanent place in schools and colleges is for the work-based component to become so central to the educational purposes of the institutions that it becomes as unthinkable to give it up as it would be to abandon math, English, or science" (ibid., p. 28).

Finn (1997) believes that the answer lies in going beyond reconceiving co-op as an "educational strategy, pedagogy, model, methodology, or curriculum" (Finn 1997, p. 41). She asserts that it is time for cooperative education to develop and define its body of knowledge, investigate its unique phenomena—e.g., the concept of learning from experience, and clarify and strengthen the qualifications of co-op practitioners. For Ricks (1996), cooperative education is inherently committed to improving the economy, people's working lives, and lifelong learning abilities. It can thus position itself to serve the experiential learning needs of students into the 21st century.

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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